

What You Need to Know HPV 101

What is HPV?

Human papillomavirus (HPV) is the most common sexually transmitted infection in the United States. The risk of contracting HPV can be reduced with vaccination.

There are over 200 strains of HPV. Low-risk strains can cause warts involving the skin, genitals, or anus but are unlikely to result in serious disease. Infection with high-risk strains may eventually lead to cancer of the cervix, genitals, anus, or throat. HPV can cause cancer in people of all sexes.

Most people who are sexually active will get some form of HPV in their lifetime. While the body's immune system can typically fight off the virus, persistent infection is more likely to cause cancer.

What are the symptoms of HPV?

The symptoms caused by HPV depends on the strain of the virus.

Low-risk strains such as HPV 6 and 11 can cause genital warts--generally painless bumps involving the genitals or anus.

High-risk strains such as HPV 16 and 18 do not cause warts but may result in cancer over time. Symptoms suggestive of cancerous changes include changes in color or thickness of the skin of the vulva or penis; chronic pain or itching of the genitals; or anal pain, bleeding, itching, or discharge.

Most cervical cancer is caused by infection with HPV. Because precancerous changes may have no symptoms at all, it's important for people with a cervix to have regular pelvic

exams and Pap tests. If a Pap test reveals abnormal changes, a procedure called a colposcopy can be performed to look more closely for precancerous cells.

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How can you catch HPV?

HPV can be transmitted through vaginal, anal, or oral sex with someone who already has the virus. Strains that cause skin warts can also be spread via contact with infected areas of skin. The HPV strains that cause cancer are not transmitted through casual contact.

HPV cannot spread through the air or water.

Is HPV treatable/curable?

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Preventing HPV transmission

Use of condoms and other barrier devices during vaginal, anal, and oral sex can help reduce spread of HPV but do not completely eliminate the risk.

The HPV vaccine available in the United States protects against nine strains of HPV, including the most common strains that cause genital warts and cervical cancer.

The HPV vaccine is recommended for children aged 9-12 years to ensure protection before becoming sexually active, though older adolescents and adults can still get the vaccine.

Fewer doses of the vaccine are needed if administered before age 15.